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Devaluing Fairness

Ronald Reagan's standards for fair elections vary from country to country. Listening to the president's evasive answers about the debacle in the Philippines and remembering what he said about Nicaragua's November effort, we must conclude that with him it isn't the "how" of it but the "who" that matters.

He has backed away from his Monday contention that the horror showed "a strong, two-party system," but at his news conference he was sticking with his goofy charge that the fraud was bipartisan. To a country that had witnessed in its living rooms in living color the beatings, shootings and vote-counting halt, he said, "There was the appearance of fraud, and yet at the same time, there wasn't any hard evidence."

He didn't insist on any "hard evidence" when it came to condemning the Nicaraguan election, which took place two days before his own. He called it "a phony"; the secretary of state chimed in with "farce." But nobody was killed for participating in it, as were almost 100 Filipinos, including, most appallingly, Cory Aquino's provincial campaign manager, who was stalked down by thugs identified as belonging to a Marcos lieutenant.

The president, overlooking the elephant in the bathtub, had "no comment" on these lamentable developments.

"What we have to say is that the determination of the government in the Philippines is going to be the business of the Philippine people, not the United States," he said.

How the Sandinistas would love to have him say the same about them.

The president is about to ask Congress for \$100 million for more murderous meddling in Nicaragua.

His stated objection to the Nicaraguan election was the absence of any serious opposition candidate, a state of affairs widely suspected of being U.S. handiwork. Arturo Cruz, a one-time member of the ruling junta, who resigned in protest in 1982 and who left exile in the United States to seek the presidency, withdrew from the race, complaining of harassment and lack of time. The question of whether he jumped out or was pushed by the CIA is open.

The election of 37 members of the Nicaraguan opposition to Parliament was regarded as "theater" by the White House. By contrast, one vote count showing some 8,000 votes for Ferdinand Marcos and nothing for Aquino occasioned no indignation. Marcos' explanation that it was his home province seems to have been swallowed.

The reason that Reagan gave for his indulgence in "the appearance of fraud" in the Philippines, his reluctance to call it "a total steal," is the transcendent importance of the U.S. bases.

They are, it seems, more important than democracy and justice and fair play and the other concepts by which we profess to live. They are, it seems, his "choke point" in assessing the outrage at the ballot box.

It is the Soviet connection.

"If you look at the basing now of the blue-ocean Navy that the Soviets have built, which is bigger than ours, and how they have placed themselves to be able to interrupt the 16 choke points in the world. . . . I don't know anything that's more important than the bases on the Philippines," Reagan said.

Some people say that it is more important to tell the thoroughly aroused Filipinos that the United States thinks that they deserve a decent election.

In dealing with the Sandinistas, the president uses the same tactics as with the Soviets. He puts an insuperable object in the middle of the road and then complains that the other side is not budging. With the Soviets, it is "Star Wars." With the Sandinistas, it is a first step he knows they will not take, which is to negotiate with the contras who are trying to kill them.

Colombia's foreign minister called the U.S. position "intransigent and extreme." Reagan doesn't care. He is inexorably pushing the Sandinistas into more repressions, closer ties with Cuba and Moscow, further military buildup. He has not yet made Daniel Ortega an ogre that American boys would fight to destroy, but he is working on it. Ortega is an inadvertent collaborator in the tragic venture. He has a crush on Fidel Castro and recently attended the Communist Party congress in Havana. A touring group of European socialists diagnosed him as a victim of the "David and Goliath syndrome."

But he can do nothing right with Reagan. And Marcos, the tin-horn dictator, can do nothing wrong. Or maybe the president knows that condoning the rottenest election outside the Soviet bloc is not in U.S. interests and has sent Philip C. Habib to Manila to nudge Marcos in the direction of the airport.